Episode 390: Ashli White, "Objects of Revolution"

[00:00:00] Announcer: You're listening to an Airwave Media Podcast.

[00:00:04] Liz Covart: *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of Colonial Williamsburg Innovation Studios.

[00:00:09] Ashli White: I do look at the ways that other sites are trying to materialize the Haitian Revolution through objects, things like maps and prints, what they do and don't engage with and how they're perpetuating certain images. And I think that's worth interrogating too, what we don't see, what doesn't survive, and thinking about then how makers the way that they are grappling materially with the Haitian Revolution and trying to broadcast certain views of it.

[00:00:53] Liz Covart: Hello and welcome to episode 390 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in, and I'm your host Liz Covart. When we think about the American Revolution, the French Revolution, or the Haitian Revolution, we think about the ideas of freedom and equality. We think of those ideals because all three revolutions discussed obtaining eighteenth-century versions of those ideals.

What we don't always think about when we think about revolutions are the objects that inspired, came out of, and were circulated by those revolutions. Ashli White, an associate professor of history at the University of Miami in Florida, joins us to investigate the revolutionary things that came out of the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions and circulated around the Atlantic world. Ashli is the author of the book, *Revolutionary Things: Material Culture and Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century Atlantic World*. Now, during our exploration of revolutionary objects, Ashli reveals information about the age of revolutions in the Atlantic world, connections between the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions, and what objects from these revolutions can teach us about the people and ideas who supported and protested them.

But first, you still have time to get us your ideas for episode 400. The Colonial Williamsburg Innovation Studios team and I are collecting your ideas for how we should mark episode 400 in December. To send us your ideas about the guests you might like to hear from or the topics you would like to hear discussed, post a comment in our listener community on Facebook or send me an email, liz@benfranklinsworld.com. Okay, are you ready to dive deep into the age of

revolutions and the objects that came out of those revolutions? Allow me to introduce you to our guest historian.

Joining us is an associate professor of history at the University of Miami in Florida. She studies the history of early America and has research expertise in the different ways that early North America connected to the Atlantic world. She's the author of several books and articles, including *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic,* and her most recent book, *Revolutionary Things: Material Culture and Politics in the Late Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World*. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Ashli White!

[00:03:40] Ashli White: Thank you so much. It is, of course, a pleasure to be with you.

[00:03:43] Liz Covart: So Ashli's book, *Revolutionary Things*, examines material culture, or objects, during the age of revolutions. Specifically, Ashli studies objects that were connected to the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions. Ashli, could we start by having you tell us about the age of revolutions and why historians always seem to link the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions together?

[00:04:06] Ashli White: Absolutely. So the age of revolutions is a shorthand way to encapsulate about fifty years of dynamism and change throughout North America, the Caribbean, South America, West Africa, and Europe. It is that late eighteenth, early nineteenth century moment where you have the emergence of all kinds of political movements, some of which results in nations, others that don't, but that are part of a transformative, energetic, dynamic moment. And historians look at these movements collectively, in order to think about the ways they were and were not connected, and to explain why this moment in particular is such a hotbed of political change.

[00:04:59] Liz Covart: Do we know how or could we talk about how the United States, France and Haiti, the three places you discuss in *Revolutionary Things*, were connected? So how did the new United States, France and Haiti connect with each other during this mid to late eighteenth-century world?

[00:05:15] Ashli White: In some ways, their roots go back even earlier, despite the fact that the British colonies of North America were within the British Empire. We do know that there's a good deal of slippage, illicit and sometimes approved across empires between the French colony

of Saint Domingue, what became Haiti, France, as well as British North America. So that's the Atlantic-ness, I think, the kind of fungibility between empires, not that empires weren't important in shaping certain aspects of the Atlantic world, but I think there's a sensibility among some historians who are interested in Atlantic-ness to move across those imperial lines.

So there are roots before the revolution to be sure that scholars have interrogated, but in the late eighteenth century, you see a kind of intensity in the relationship among these three places. And part of that has to deal with timing, obviously with the US Revolution, the French enter into an alliance with the patriots in 1778; that formalizes their relationship. And Saint Domingue, the French colony, becomes an important entrepot, as one scholar has called it, linking France via the Caribbean to North America during the revolution. And that relationship persists, it changes, but it persists in the aftermath of the Peace Treaty of 1783.

And then when the French Revolution explodes in 1789, there's a similar wave of political action in the French colonies too in Guadalupe and Martinique, but in the case that I study most Saint Domingue. And it's the quick succession of these three revolutions in the United States, in France, and in what becomes Haiti, that for me, lends a kind of intensity of a circuit in which these three areas and diverse populations in these three areas are all exchanging, in the case of my book, objects that become instrumental to the ways that people understand, try to act on, and then sometimes try to check revolutionary change.

[00:07:33] Liz Covart: We'll of course be talking a lot about the objects that people in these three nations sent around the world and to each other. But one area I think we should talk about before we get into objects is the Atlantic world. One of your areas of research expertise, Ashli, is in the ways that North America and the Caribbean were connected in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Would you tell us what scholars like yourself mean when they say the Atlantic world and how they define it? Is this a term that historians agree on? Is there a single definition of the Atlantic world?

[00:08:06] Ashli White: It's not something historians really agree on. And actually, probably the definition I gave you of the age of revolutions, other historians would press against. So for me, the Atlantic world is in some ways, one could think of it as a space oriented around the Atlantic Ocean that emerges with European colonialism in the late fifteenth century and evolves to include West Africa, the Americas, including the Caribbean, different parts of Europe. As colonialism unfolds, the Atlantic world unfolds too. And while it is not a tidy, self-contained unit—scholars have pointed out the ways that this Atlantic world is also deeply tied to what's

happening in India or in the Pacific, right, sort of pushing it to think about the globe—I do think there are distinctive and interesting features that emerge around the Atlantic, becomes a new space for colonial competition and violence, war, but also cooperation, cultural development, economic development over the century.

You can argue about too when the Atlantic world ends. But as somebody who's interested more in the early period, I sort of stop in the early nineteenth century. But it's a kind of paradigm of thinking transnationally in this period, which is I think an important move. It lends people to ask new questions and see places and people from new perspectives. And for me, that's the scholarly payoff. It constantly pushes me to expand horizons and to reconsider what I thought I knew.

[00:09:54] Liz Covart: And now we're one definition away from really digging into your book, *Revolutionary Things*, where you make the case that material culture shaped the way that people in the Atlantic world understood revolutionary ideas like equality and freedom. So Ashli, would you tell us what you mean by material culture? And how we can use this type of historical source to study the past?

[00:10:17] Ashli White: I think for me in this book, material culture is centered around certain types of objects. So in the book I look at ceramics and furniture, metalware, clothing, accessories, but I also include things like maps and prints as material culture rather than say as art historical kind of approaches, and even life size wax figures.

But material culture scholars engage with manifestations of the material world that certainly go beyond the set of objects I look in my book. So, everything from the built environment to gravestones to foodways, all of these can be considered part of material culture. It's an attempt to understand how people through the making of things, and the interaction with things, understand and shape their world.

[00:11:16] Liz Covart: And how can we use this material culture, these objects that seem to include a vast array of different things, to better understand the past?

[00:11:24] Ashli White: Well I think for me, actors, no matter their race, gender, class, they all existed in material worlds. One could argue that they exist in material worlds more so than they exist in textual worlds, like the world of text and print. Not everyone was literate or was able to write, but they all interacted with things. And so, for me, that signals an incredible source base

for understanding how people at the time made sense of their world, acted upon their world, it gives us insights into culture, into economies, into societies, and as I argue for the book, it's also really crucial for politics.

[00:12:12] Liz Covart: As you were speaking, I was thinking about how objects continue to have meaning in our own lives. For example, when we hear of someone's house burning down, the one thing they tell the reporter that they're most sad about losing are their family photographs and other family heirlooms that family members had passed down through the generations. So it seems like having those stories of the past contained in those heirlooms and in those photos continue to tell us a great deal about the past even in our own time.

[00:12:42] Ashli White: Absolutely. I think there's too, a way that objects are active. And I don't mean that they're necessarily agents, but the very example you use, there are connections that one makes with objects, meanings that one imparts to them, and those change over time. So an object from previous generations might mean something different to a grandchild than it did for, say, the original owner. So there are ways that objects accumulate meaning. And then there are ways to that objects are somewhat unpredictable, right? They break, they misfire, they don't work. And so in that way, they can influence people's actions and reactions.

And so I think that by considering objects as dynamic, changing over time, and as very much a part of people's lives, rather than say, simply badges or commodities on a sheet, not that those aren't things that objects could do, but it's just one of a small portion of the ways in which they resonate for individuals and for societies. I think that active view of material culture encourages us to ask all kinds of questions of objects. And as part of that, we come to new realizations about the past.

[00:14:03] Liz Covart: Well, let's dig into some of the objects that are associated with these three revolutions, the American Revolution, French Revolution, and Haitian Revolution. So we mentioned that in Ashli's book, *Revolutionary Things*, she makes the case that objects really shape the way that people thought about liberty and revolutionary concepts like freedom and equality. Ashli, would you talk about how objects had the power to shape people's understandings and meanings during revolutions? Which if you think about it, revolutions are essentially very chaotic times when people try to make sense of what is happening around them. So perhaps objects are just what people need to make sense of the revolutionary world.

[00:14:42] Ashli White: You're precisely right. And actually, I kind of revel in that chaos. In the book, one of the things I'm most concerned with doing is thinking about the heat of the moment. So typically objects are used to talk about the emergence of nationalism or in commemorations of revolutions, right, that there's a revolutions, the US, the French, the Haitian, they all develop specific motifs to celebrate their new regimes. And this is an important window into the formation of unique political cultures. Republican, with a small r, political cultures that are emerging at this time. But in a way that's almost like aspirational and after the fact. What I try to do in the book is track the way that the circulation of certain types of objects among these three revolutions or associated with these three revolutions are a means through which people grapple with the ideals that are perpetuated by these revolutions and the unevenness of the application.

So, what I discovered in researching and writing the book, is that certain genres of objects had different kinds of political capacity. So that it really mattered what type of good. So that ceramics, how they resonated politically in this Atlantic context were different say than life size wax figures. Or it also mattered where things were made and of what they were made, that introduced certain types of possibilities. So if we're made of cloth versus wood, that that materiality and the values around it had certain resonances for eighteenth-century actors. And it determined to a degree how that politicization unfolded. These were all deeply socially constructed, too, that people had ideas of what kind of change they were willing to tolerate in their material worlds, and that influenced the politicization of objects, too. And it mattered who had an object. So, for example, a formerly enslaved person in Saint Domingue with a queensware platter, that had different valences, say, than the duc de Orléans in France buying one in the late 1780s.

So who, where, when, all those moments shaped how people could imbue these articles with political meaning and look to leverage them in their world. So I guess that's why each chapter is dedicated to thinking about a genre and how that genre moves among the three, and then looking at the ways that they lean into political concepts. So uniforms have more to do with equality, prints have more to do with popular sovereignty, for all those factors that I just sketched out for you in terms of categories.

[00:17:46] Liz Covart: I'm so glad you brought up ceramics, because one of the objects that you cover in your book, *Revolutionary Things*, has a real special meaning to me, and that is the No Stamp Act teapot. And the meaning this teapot has for me is I am a scholar of the American Revolution, and I used to interpret and talk about the Boston Stamp Act riots during my time in the National Park Service. I used to talk about that event quite a bit, actually. And then on my

very first trip to Colonial Williamsburg in April 2012, we came around my birthday, I went into a gift shop and they had a replica of the No Stamp Act teapot. And it was just like the one that I had talked about in the Park Service, that I had seen in so many different books I'd read on the revolution.

It's a cream colored pot with a bright red border and it says "No Stamp Act" on it. And I just had to have that teapot. So my family bought it for me as my birthday present and so I came home from this trip from Colonial Williamsburg with this teapot and with the leather fire bucket that I just had to have because that was just really cool. So that's my story with the No Stamp Act teapot. Ashli, would you tell us about the historical creation and meaning of that teapot for people who lived in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world?

[00:18:58] Ashli White: Sure. I would have bought it too, I think it was a good choice for your birthday back in 2012. No, I think that is an iconic object for folks interested in the US Revolution because of the ways that it seems to encapsulate some major trends. One, the No Stamp Act is the allusion to popular protest against the Stamp Act and the origins of the American Revolution and the politicization of it within the everyday. Because a teapot is something that folks would have used, especially white people would have used for drinking tea.

And then of course, then tea becomes politicized as a good a few years later. And it's also representative of something that scholars have pointed to, called the consumer revolution in the eighteenth century. The way that certain manufacturers, particularly in Britain, around ceramics and cloth and metalware, were able to churn out, they had the industrial capacity to offer greater variety in certain key goods. And that people in the colonies began to consume these goods much more voraciously. And this becomes an intersection, right, between these two of goods, political protest, and they seem to intersect. So the teapot is fantastic in that respect.

One of the things I discovered in working on this book is that those teapots are also incredibly rare in the world of ceramics in the eighteenth century, in that it would not have been an object that lots of manufacturers would have made. To be sure they had the capacity to make it. And they did make a few. The exact numbers are difficult to determine because of the ways that records were kept. But we do know that those would have represented a really small slice of a ceramic maker's production. It would have been something speculative, something to have tried out on a market and to see how well it would have lasted.

So what I'm more interested in the book is the way that in the case of ceramics, more everyday wares could become politicized. So, your souvenir teapot, your replica souvenir teapot, in the eighteenth century it would have been on creamware, which Britain excelled at making and it was relatively inexpensive. But the plainer wares were things that people bought more often, in part because they were looking for something serviceable in their dinnerware to last them several generations. They didn't change ceramics over as much as small accessories, for example. So while I think that the teapot is indicative of certain trends, it doesn't encapsulate the full range of possibilities for ceramics.

And so in the book, I trace the ways that queensware in particular moves from Britain into France, North America, and the Caribbean. And the ways that it's access to that particular good at certain moments by certain individuals has a kind of political currency that perhaps we haven't appreciated as much as we have appreciated the No Stamp Act teapot.

[00:22:08] Liz Covart: I wonder if we could dig into the politics of manufacturing these everyday protest goods. It sounds like the No Stamp Act teapots were actually produced in England, not the North American colonies, and then circulated, you know, exported and circulated in the colonies. And if we think about that for a moment, it couldn't have been really politic for English manufacturers to produce protest goods for the American protesters and then export these goods to the colonies that, in a way, support the colonists' protests. So, could you tell us what went into the politics of manufacturing goods for protests and goods for revolution?

[00:22:46] Ashli White: Well, manufacturers have to make a particular calculus. I think you're exactly right in that it would have been brazen and perhaps ill-advised for manufacturers to pour an enormous amount of resources into making a line of goods like that. And it's really not until the nineteenth century where you see English manufacturers making particular lines of decorated goods, transfer printed goods, say with US scenes that appeal directly to an American market. Instead, they're looking for things that are more Atlantic and that could appeal to diverse consumers, wherever they can push their goods into the late eighteenth century. And so manufacturers are conscious. They are also political operators to a certain extent. In the late eighteenth century, Wedgwood is constantly lobbying the government for better trade deals and for things like canals to connect the Midlands through to Atlantic ports.

But there are moments and certain types of goods where there's maybe a little more tolerance. And for that, with ceramics, we can think of medallions, small little accessories, maybe an inch oval, they kind of look like, this is where we need images, like little cameos. And Wedgwood

produced those as he also produced dinnerware ceramics. And with this, he had a lot more diversity and was willing to take on things that were more politicized in part because he could offer a range. So he could have Ben Franklin, but he could have the estranged loyalist son of Franklin, William Franklin. He could have Louis the XVI, he could have Edmund Burke. There's a whole range at which he's willing to play because they're small, they're cheap, they can be changed on easily, and he offers thousands of them. So manufacturers, depending on what they make and how ambitious they are with their markets, have a political calculus of their own as they're responding to revolutions and thinking how best to weather them politically and economically from their particular purview or location in the Atlantic, such as Britain.

[00:25:00] Liz Covart: You mentioned earlier that the No Stamp Act teapot was not a widely manufactured or circulated good. So there weren't many of them that existed during the 1760s. What about an object like a cockade, a clothing accessory that seemed to circulate widely during the age of revolutions? Would you tell us what cockades look like and about the different meanings they carried during the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions?

[00:25:26] Ashli White: Absolutely. So a cockade is a small rosette, usually of ribbon. It's something that could be easily sewn. Ribbon was a relatively inexpensive item in the late eighteenth century. And ribbon was incorporated in people's dress already. So it was used as a fastener, but also as a decorative trimming. And it can be found certainly in the wardrobes of the elite, but we also have evidence of enslaved people when they're able to buy or acquire ribbon, to offer some kind of distinction to their clothing too.

So it's something that runs the gamut, that is accessible, and that lots of people know how to work with it, to create something like a cockade which could be attached in lots of places. So it could be worn on hats. It could be pinned to lapels or to dresses. It would be something that would be distinctive and visible, but relatively small and it could be removed, right? Unlike the No Stamp Act teapot, it's kind of hard to scratch off the slogan once it's on there, but cockades are something that one can choose to put on and one could choose to take off. And in the late eighteenth century, cockades became extraordinarily popular.

They did have some association with politics previous to the age of revolutions. But what we see in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century is an explosion of cockades, in volume and diversity. So almost every political movement, the various revolutions in Europe, those in the Caribbean and North America too, they adopt cockades as a way to signal their allegiance to a particular cause. So for the French it was the *tricolore*, the red, white, and blue, which is what

it continues to be. If you see Emmanuel Macron at any event, you will notice that he's often wearing a cockade.

But because they are so easy to pick up, lots of people can embrace them. And one of the tensions around revolutions is who gets to participate in a revolution and to what extent. And with cockades, they quickly become adopted by not only elites and middle-class white people whether they are in France or North America or in Saint Domingue, but women take cockades, people of African descent, enslaved and free, they too pick up cockades in order to weigh into political moments.

And what becomes particularly tricky about this around a cockade is that cockades have a firm association in the eighteenth century with the military. So a shorthand for describing one becoming a soldier, for example, is "to pick up the cockade." And so they are associated not just with a political point of view, but a willingness to use force to carry through on that allegiance, as it were. So then they become incredibly controversial. And they provoke all kinds of violence as people with different cockades meet on the streets. And as people of African descent and as women use their cockades to participate in revolutionary movements, taking up arms in some cases, in ways that white revolutionaries in France and the United States and Saint Domingue have a difficult time coming to terms with that challenge of including those sectors into "the people" with all the rights that the people are looking to assert.

[00:29:14] Liz Covart: It also seems like with the cockades, and it's probably true of other objects as well but especially with the cockades, that they became a way for people of different nationalities who lived in different locations from these revolutions to show their support, or perhaps their protest, or to make some other political commentary about specific revolutionary movements.

For example, during the period of the Jay Treaty in the mid 1790s, when the United States was trying to figure out its trade alliances, France was in the early days of its revolution, and Great Britain was still trying to make the United States pay for its independence by impressing American goods, sailors, and ships, and by refusing to vacate American outposts in the West. So George Washington dispatched John Jay of New York to Great Britain to negotiate a treaty for favorable trade status. And I don't think anybody was completely pleased with the treaty that Jay brought home, but George Washington championed it, and the treaty very quickly became a symbol of Federalist policy and politics. So if you were a budding Jeffersonian, you were out there wearing a French cockade, the *tricolore*, as you stated, Ashli, to state, "France was our first

ally we need to support them in their revolution and we shouldn't be allying with Great Britain, we should be allying with France." And I paraphrase those sentiments, but that pretty much encapsulates the sentiment that was being advertised by wearing that tricolor cockade in America. And this was a really big factor. The Jay Treaty was a really big factor in the political divisions of the early republic. So the Jeffersonian cockade was really just as much about a silent commentary on American politics as much as it was a show of support for France and the French Revolution.

[00:30:58] Ashli White: Exactly. There's a way that these international symbols of revolution get transposed in the case of the US onto political debates, right, which are deeply influenced by international affairs. And they accelerate them and agitate them even further. And I think your example is really fascinating because one of the questions that then emerges with, say, Jeffersonians wearing the tricolor around the time of the Jay Treaty is that the tricolor is also the symbol for change in Saint Domingue. And by 1795, that means the end of slavery and the extension of rights to men of African descent. And so Jeffersonians, even as they're taking on their tricolor, they're talking about France, to be sure, but they are also trying not to associate that tricolor cockade with Haiti, with revolutionary Saint Domingue at the same time. So there is a kind of selectivity in the ways that as these cockades move and as they get adopted people look to leverage them for political ends at home but also are looking to shut down aspects of revolution that they find troubling. And for those Jeffersonians, it certainly would be the way that the revolution in Saint Domingue is unfolding in mid 1790s and beyond.

[00:32:20] Liz Covart: With the cockade, I think we can see how that symbol traveled from France to the United States to Haiti. Were there other objects from, say, the Haitian Revolution that made their way to the United States, France, or elsewhere in the Atlantic world that were viewed positively and used to show support for the Haitian Revolution?

Actually, before you answer that, let's take a moment to thank our episode sponsor, and then we'll dig into this really fascinating question when we get back. As we get ready to commemorate, celebrate, and reflect on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution, we should remember that we're part of a longer tradition of marking these historic occasions. For example, two hundred years ago, Americans prepared to commemorate fifty years of American independence and democracy. As part of their commemoration, they invited the Marquis de Lafayette, the hero of two worlds, to return to the United States to help them mark the occasion. On August 16, 1824, Lafayette arrived in New York harbor and disembarked to a crowd of more than eighty thousand Americans lining the

streets of Manhattan. Lafayette's landing in New York marked the start of a thirteen-month tour of the United States, which at the time consisted of twenty-four states. Now, none of us were alive two hundred years ago to witness this grand event and celebration, but we can witness a recreation of parts of Lafayette's grand tour in 2024 and 2025.

On August 16, 2024, in honor of the 200th anniversary of Lafayette's grand tour of the United States, the American Friends of Lafayette organization will kick off a recreation of Lafayette's return to the United States. To learn more about Lafayette 200 and how and where you can attend one of its events, visit benfranklinsworld.com/Lafayette200. That's benfranklinsworld.com/Lafayette200.

Ashli Would there are other objects from, say, the Haitian Revolution that made their way to the United States, France, and elsewhere in the Atlantic world that were viewed positively and used to show support for the Haitian Revolution?

[00:34:27] Ashli White: Well, we do know, for example, with cockades, that Black soldiers and sailors from Saint Domingue when they were on ships were wearing tricolor cockades. And this elicited commentary among white Americans who were concerned about what it would mean for Black Americans, enslaved and free, to see Black Saint Dominguens wearing the tricolor, that it might inspire them to revolt because it was understood, again, as a symbol of not only support, but also a willingness to back that support.

And Black Americans were certainly inspired by thinking about and learning about how Black men and women were leveraging the power of a cockade to claim freedom and equality. I think the trickiest part of the book, like one of my goals for the book was to treat all three revolutions with each genre of object, right. So, if I couldn't really find it in relation to the Haitian Revolution, then it didn't make it into the book. And I should be clear that there are lots of objects I don't treat in the book because they don't have Atlantic ambits. So for example, French faience which is a kind of earthenware, which is decorated with all kinds of iconography for the French Revolution. If you lay it out, you could kind of find the symbolism of the French Revolution over time, kind of teach it through ceramics in a way. Those don't really circulate outside of France. They aren't popular. They're not things that people want, interestingly, in the Atlantic, so they stay pretty close to the home. North American homespun, for example, which has important political meaning in the thirteen colonies, merging into states in the nation, that doesn't really circulate. Haitian drums used in voodoo ceremonies, important for the revolution in Haiti, clear objects, but not really moving.

And so my restriction on thinking about the transfer of goods Atlanticly was revealing in that, because of mercantilism. Because especially in the case of Saint Domingue revolutionaries there did not necessarily have control of the means of production for objects that they could push out through the Atlantic world, to use objects to represent their revolution on their terms. There's a good deal of inequality in the source base. There's a good deal of silences and absences. So, I try to get around that in multiple ways, looking at what I know had to be there, but maybe necessarily couldn't trace. Something like, in terms of the provenance of objects that survived. So uniforms, military clothing, seized goods that I know Haitian revolutionaries are taking, they're selling, and they move, but don't quite have, say, the same provenance as French elite objects that are also on the move.

But I do look at the ways that other sites are trying to materialize the Haitian Revolution through objects, things like maps and prints. What they do and don't engage with, whether it's British or French or American print and map makers, and how they're perpetuating certain images. And even in the case of life-size wax figures. I was able to trace a life size wax figure of Toussaint Louverture that's shown in the United States around the time of Louverture's death. And I think that's worth interrogating too, what we don't see, what doesn't survive. And thinking about then how makers, most of whom are white, and have, despite their political spectrum, have a particular investment in maintaining racist hierarchies, the way that they are grappling materially with the Haitian Revolution and trying to broadcast certain views of it. Sorry, that's a long answer, but it's a complicated question which methodologically and in terms of the narrative of the book I was constantly engaging with.

[00:38:43] Liz Covart: You mentioned maps, and I wonder if we could dig into maps for a bit. Because one of the most fascinating examples in your book, *Revolutionary Things*, is how people of African descent used maps as a way to claim power. And in *Revolutionary Things*, you have this wonderful map that you describe that was in the possession of José Antonio Aponte. He was a Black carpenter who lived in Cuba, and he was planning a slave rebellion in 1812. But before Aponte's rebellion could take place Spanish authorities captured him and confiscated all the maps in his possession. So, Ashli, would you tell us about José Antonio Aponte and his maps? And what Aponte's interrogation by Spanish authorities reveals about how free and enslaved Black people used maps to both resist and assert power during the age of revolutions?

[00:39:36] Ashli White: My reading of Aponte is deeply indebted to scholars like Ada Ferrer and Matt Childs who've written a good deal about Aponte's rebellion and all of its complexity. And one of the things that's so striking about Aponte and his planned rebellion is this thing that

comes to be called the "book of paintings." And Professor Ferrer has this website, which actually all of your listeners can go and check out, and I encourage you to do, called Digital Aponte. On that site, she has transcribed and translated parts of the interrogation. So the book of paintings, which included maps, doesn't survive, but the interrogator's questions about the content of those images does. And what's noticeable about those images is that there is no text. Instead, it seems that Aponte was narrating histories, episodes, using the images as launching points for inspiring people to join the cause and to rebel in Cuba.

And for me, it was fascinating that maps were part of that book of paintings. I mean, there were images in the book of paintings of Haitian revolutionary leaders, right. Like Henri Christophe or Toussaint Louverture. And those matter, to be sure, but the maps were captivating in part because one of the things that I found fascinating was the ways that revolutionaries in Saint Domingue and France and the US were using, maps were a tool of revolution. They're necessarily politicized. Like a map, as map scholars have talked about is politicized, right. Somebody who is putting out a particular vision of the world and usually that has a political grounding.

And maps in an age of revolution, one of the means through which they become really important and politicized is through war. You need maps in the late eighteenth century, it was commonly believed, for effective warfare. And one of the things I was able to trace was that Black armies in Saint Domingue were clearly using maps in order to coordinate their campaigns as the armies grew. They were getting their hands on published maps, they were making their own maps because every military in this period was complaining about the inaccuracy of maps. So it wasn't just having a map, but it was constantly mapping and correcting. So we know that Black armies are participating in that and then using their spatial understanding via maps and the landscape to fight for liberty and equality. So, that's a way through a very kind of practical means through which maps become politicized.

And what's interesting, there's a limit to that too, right. And the Aponte story, as well as what happens with the Haitian revolution is a part of it. Because while Black armies are mapping throughout the late eighteenth century, Toussaint Louverture is hiring engineers to make all kinds of maps throughout his time in Saint Domingue, not many of those get printed and disseminated Atlanticly. In fact, you don't really see in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution, a map that calls Haiti, "Haiti" produced outside of Haiti until the 1810s. So it's part of that inability to acknowledge the Haitian Revolution and Haiti as an independent state.

So while Black actors like Aponte and like the leaders and soldiers in revolutionary Saint Domingue and Haiti are mapping their worlds and using those maps to affect change, or in the case of Aponte try to affect change to try to change the narrative and to realize freedom and equality, they run into the structural limits of an Atlantic world that is still wedded to a particular racist notion of society and of politics. And so the translation into printed apps, because they don't control the means of that production and its dissemination is severely limited. But it gives us a portal into understanding how they are re-imagining, via revolution and through objects, the spatial organization that revolution can bring.

[00:44:05] Liz Covart: Now, regarding Aponte's maps, when we think of historians who study objects, we may picture them in an archive or in a museum and likely holding or looking at something like the No Stamp Act teapot or a cockade. But my understanding from your book, *Revolutionary Things*, is that Aponte's map, his book of paintings, is not an object that has survived time. So we don't have it to look at it today. There's no library or archive that has this book because it just didn't survive. So Ashli, how did you examine material culture like the book of paintings? How did you examine Aponte's map if the physical maps have been lost to time?

[00:44:45] Ashli White: That's a fantastic methodological question. And so in the case of Aponte, we know about it through the interrogation. And we know about other objects, too, through similar interrogations. Vincent Ogé, who I used to start the book, we know about the objects he had with him when he showed up in Saint Domingue because they take apart his luggage and they describe what's in it and they ask him about it. Aponte, they go through every single image in his book of paintings and they get him to talk about it. And that is a tricky source, right, because it is mediated as a coerced situation that individuals being interrogated, like Aponte, is trying to perhaps not being completely transparent about the meaning of these images or what exactly is being depicted in an effort to perhaps save future campaign for rebellion, to try to avoid death, although for many of those actors I think they realize that that's an impossibility. But there's a desire to obfuscate the meaning and potential meaning of these things for the masterclass, the ruling class that's interrogating them. And so methodologically, one has to be extraordinarily careful to deal with things that don't survive. But there's so much that does not survive that in some ways I feel like it would be foolhardy not to try and engage and to build as best as we can a vision of what that material looked like or might have looked like based on what we know.

So for dealing with absences, one looks at a good deal at what does survive. Like I ended up looking at a lot of maps from this period to get a sense of the genre, what was out there, what

was available? What was the common lexicon that people would use to denote certain features on maps? Like what was the *lingua franca* of mapping? And then to try to find as many written accounts as I could of people talking about maps, sort of using the language of maps. And that ranged from soldiers' diaries to these kinds of inquisitions to fleeting references in newspapers.

Maps and prints are actually really tricky to research as a genre, which maybe seems a bit counterintuitive because we don't have lots of good lists of what mapmakers sold or what printmakers sold. Like even in people's inventories, it'll say "twenty maps," and you're just desperate as a researcher because you want to know, like, well which twenty maps are in there, to get a sense of what people saw and to resuscitate their visual world. So it takes a good deal of interdisciplinary work to look at what does remain, look for as many references to what no longer exists, and to think deeply about the context in which those descriptions and those surviving objects existed and exist now, to make sense of the power dynamics and to try to then get a sense of what might have been intended with someone like Aponte, as he's showing maps as part of his inspiration for individuals to join his rebellion.

[00:48:04] Liz Covart: We've talked a lot about different objects, and there are even more objects in your book, *Revolutionary Things,* that we can read about and explore. And we've also talked a lot about the different ways we can learn about individual and collective experiences of people from the past by investigating a single object, just as we did with the cockade, the teapot, and Aponte's map. Ashli, how do you think, or perhaps hope, that your work will change how we think and talk about revolutionary things, and even the objects that we clamor for today in our own time?

[00:48:37] Ashli White: Well, I think this book is really indebted to curators, to archivists, to a whole range of people who have been and still are—some of them in Colonial Williamsburg of course—actively pursuing the past through objects and realizing that objects are these amazing portals through which people now can connect to the past and think about it in creative ways. And also how individuals then, things matter, and understanding the differences in the long trajectories, I think is incredibly important because I think to an earlier question we were talking about, how people then existed in material worlds. Not everybody read or was literate, but they all encountered things.

And we too live in material worlds. And the state of our material world is a cause for discussion now. So I hope that through the book, and there are other encounters with public history venues, with other scholars work, that we come to a more dynamic and nuanced understanding of the

material world. That we think about ways that we can turn to the material world wisely, thoughtfully, in order to continue to try to make good on some of those ideals that came out of the revolution. Ideas like freedom, like equality, like solidarity, which I think are still very, very much worth fighting for.

[00:50:15] Liz Covart: And do you have any advice for us on how we can avoid losing a map like José Aponte's map from our own time as we consider archiving our own histories? So do you have any advice or lessons learned from all the different research you've done about the material world, about how we can build a comprehensive archive of our own time and our own lives?

[00:50:37] Ashli White: I think building archives and collections are extraordinarily hard. What I was so appreciative of time and time again, for all the things that you wish had remained, it's also impressive just how much does. And my encounters with archivists, with museum professionals, is that they are very thoughtful, and increasingly so, about the ways that they're looking to build out their collections. That they are incorporating and welcoming people from underrepresented communities, opening dialogues to think about how these institutions which reflect the power dynamics of societies, archives and museums, how they can help to maybe redress some of the inequalities of society by the ways that they collect. I think that is essential for moving these institutions into the future and thinking about how we collect. I also think people need to keep looking. I mean, it's extraordinary what the National Museum of African American History and Culture was able—they started with no collection and they created a collection which is rich and fascinating and continues to grow. So I think this pursuit for things from the past is still very much out there.

I think, as well, to ask new questions about what we see. To not take what we think we know for granted about objects that seem transparent. That as we sort of bring new questions to the table things will look different. And the interpretations they give over could be much, perhaps more capacious than we have thought, and engage with questions and populations which we haven't maybe considered as part of that object life or lives as it were. And I think we have to be interdisciplinarity. We've got to look at history, archaeology, environments, music, art, all of that feeds into a kind of dynamism.

Objects are interdisciplinary by their very nature, and I think we should take full advantage of the disciplines that have emerged and bring it to bear on those objects so that we can interpret them and convey their meanings as richly as possible.

[00:52:54] Liz Covart: Now it's time for the "Time Warp." This is a fun segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently or if someone had acted differently.

Ashli, what do you think would have happened if more material culture related to the Haitian Revolution had been more widely circulated in the new United States? How might that have shaped understandings of freedom and equality in the new fledgling nation?

[00:53:43] Ashli White: I love that question. I think it would have been tremendous, actually, if more objects from the Haitian Revolution had traveled to the United States, but it also reached Europe, France, and other sites throughout the Atlantic. I think what would have been so powerful about that reach would have been the ways that it would provide Haitian revolutionaries the ability to broadcast their particular vision of freedom and equality and solidarity, and to have it potentially enter the lives of others throughout the Atlantic world.

It would have been a way for them to assert the Haitian Revolution and its political content as it was unfolding. Haitian revolutionaries did this as much as possible through texts, and those had an impact. But I think the objects would have been remarkable. I do think that for many white people throughout the Atlantic world, they would have been extraordinarily difficult to accept on the terms that Haitian revolutionaries would want them. I think there would have been a good deal of resistance to them. I think among people of African descent, free and enslaved, it would have been an extraordinary source of inspiration, of conversation, of part of the ideological flowering of what some scholars have called the Black Atlantic.

And I think for historians, it would now, of course, because I can't resist that aspect of it too, it would be a tremendous benefit for helping us talk about the Haitian Revolution on the terms that Haitian revolutionaries wanted to be seen. And that would be a spectrum to be sure. It's not to say that all Haitian revolutionaries agreed. They didn't all agree in France. They didn't all agree in the United States. But to see more of the internal workings of that ideology and politics and worldview as it was unfolding in the 1790s and the early 1800s, it would be extraordinary. And I think it would place the Haitian Revolution even more centrally to the age of Atlantic revolutions then as well as now.

[00:55:58] Liz Covart: So, Ashli, now that *Revolutionary Things* is out in the world, what aspect of Atlantic history are you researching and writing about now?

[00:56:05] Ashli White: I am contemplating my next move. I am curious about how the experience of revolution, and war and revolution, and then the aftermath of reconstructing after revolution, how that shapes people's understandings of their environments. I guess I'm moving a bit away from a material culture approach to objects, to thinking about it a little bit more in terms of environments and landscape, and how people through this moment of disruption and then of reconstruction in the aftermath of revolutionary wars, how that shapes their engagement with environments and their understanding of the natural world.

[00:56:50] Liz Covart: If we have more questions about material culture or how scholars use objects or perhaps even about objects from the age of revolutions, how can we contact you, Ashli?

[00:57:01] Ashli White: Oh, I'm easy to find. So I'm at the Department of History at the University of Miami in Florida. So feel free to send me an email. My email address is open and accessible. I'd be happy to field any questions and receive any comments folks might have.

[00:57:16] Liz Covart: Ashli White, thank you for joining us, and helping us think through the age of revolutions through the objects that were produced, circulated, and thought about during that time period.

[00:57:26] Ashli White: Thank you so much. This has been such a pleasure.

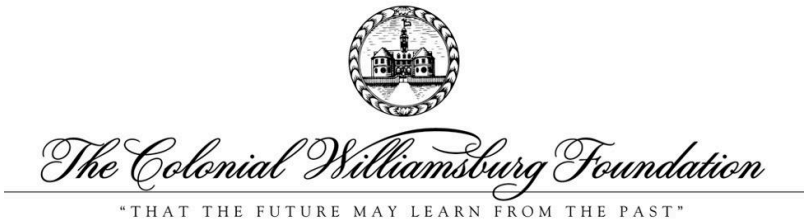
[00:57:29] Liz Covart: Objects open portals to the past, just as the objects we receive from family members or buy for a special occasion. Objects carry meaning and purpose. For example, the No Stamp Act teapot commemorated and shared the sentiment of protest that many Americans carried when Parliament tried to tax them in 1765. Now, although not widely circulated, as Ashli revealed, the teapot carried layers of meaning. From the idea that it was not okay for Parliament to tax the colonies through the Stamp Act, to the idea that English manufacturers were making this creamware ceramic in England and then exporting it to what many in England viewed as their rebellious colonies. So the teapot not only proclaimed the idea of protest, it also served as an act of support for the colonies.

Now, more widely circulated and more accessible than the No Stamp Act teapot was the French tricolor cockade. As Ashli noted, cockades were relatively easy to buy and create, and easy to display and take off when circumstances required it. The cockade is also a great example of how

objects of revolution carry and change meaning. In France, the cockade was a show of support for the French Revolution and its ideals of white male freedom, equality, and brotherhood. In Haiti, the same style of cockade, a ribbon rosette with the red, white, and blue of the French tricolor, also showed support for the French Revolution and expanded on the meanings of the French Revolution by serving as a symbol of Black freedom and equality, ideals that Haitians fought for during the Haitian Revolution. And within the context of the United States, the tricolor cockade continued to mean support for the French Revolution, as well as a symbol of protest against Federalist policies and politics. However, as Ashli stated, the expanded definition of French freedom, equality, and brotherhood for white and Black Frenchmen that the Haitians applied to it, was not a meaning that white Jeffersonians wanted to carry over into the United States.

Studying the objects of revolution, such as the No Stamp Act teapot, the French and Haitian cockades, and even the maps and images created by individuals like José Antonio Aponte, allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions, and what about those revolutions mattered to the people who lived through them and watched them from afar. Now, reading the ideas of revolutions can help us gain a similar understanding of what mattered to people and what they thought was worth fighting for. The written word tends to represent only the literate population, typically the elite and mercantile classes, while objects, as Ashli pointed out, tended to be more universally available and adopted by all kinds of people, the literate and illiterate, to express their sentiments of what they thought was worth fighting for. So as we think about the age of revolutions, or any aspect of the past, we would do well to investigate not just the words and ideas of revolutions, but also their objects and material goods. You can find more information about Ashli, her book, *Revolutionary Things*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinsworld.com/390.

Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts. So if you enjoyed this episode, please tell your friends and family about it. Production assistance for this podcast comes from my colleagues at Colonial Williamsburg Innovation Studios, Jordan Hammon, Ashley Bouknight, Derek Litvak, and Morgan McCullough. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the Airwave Media Podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com. Finally, what objects and material goods fascinate you? Is there an object or set of objects from the early American past that you'd like to see us investigate on this podcast? Let me know liz@benfranklinsworld.com.



Ben Franklin's World is a production of Colonial Williamsburg Innovation Studios.